

Being Colour: Reflections on Being Indian in Belfast

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Being Colour: Reflections on Being Indian in Belfast

Prayag Ray

You can't really take a boat from India to Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, when I first got here, I was extremely 'fresh off the boat'. Imagine getting off that boat. It's cold. The ground doesn't feel too steady. People are speaking strange, and god are they white. Suddenly you're not just a face in a very large crowd any more. You stand out, more so in your head than anywhere else. All your ideas about 'the West' – passively received from *Friends* and *Top Gear* – are a load of rubbish. There's a 'West' in this town but it's not the one with skyscrapers and the Coco Bongo.

I hadn't heard about Northern Ireland except for some murmurs about a conflict in the media, and some poems by Seamus Heaney mentioned in a BA module on Modernism in Jadavpur University. But here I was, the grateful recipient of a scholarship to do a PhD in English at Queen's. At first I asked all the wrong questions, blasé: 'Are you Catholic or Protestant?' For the life of me I couldn't understand why white people had been killing white people at least ostensibly in the name of one god who they both believed in.

I was welcomed warmly into the English department by my peers. The craic, I soon found, was mighty, and the beer several orders of magnitude better than what's brewed in

Bengal. So I drank and I socialised, I read and I wrote. But here's the rub: I was anxious. Very, very anxious.

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As a student of post-colonialism, I was well aware, in theory, of the struggles of ex-pat Indians in the West. But to experience it for myself was something else. Brash as it may seem to speak for numberless émigrés, I think many Indians in the West are encumbered by an almost pathological anxiety. Some white men came to our country two hundred years ago with a red, white, and blue flag, and called that country theirs - familiar story. Then our customs were derided, our languages denuded, our sense of civilizational pride crushed. We internalised an inferiority complex, wrote into ourselves an image made by others.

When we come to the West now, we are always struggling with the anxieties attendant on this inheritance of loss. The cultural cringe is turned inwards. Who am I? What is my place in the whiter world? Am I not adequate? Much of my first year, then, was a struggle with anxieties. My own insecurities ran roughshod over my social life. I found no place of belonging.

So I took to the countryside. I began to cycle far and very wide. Places with names like nowhere else - Flowbrog, Tullyrusk, Gawley's Gate (where there was no gate). I didn't care; I wanted to disappear, vanish, vamoose - thirty miles, forty miles, fifty miles. And here I found a kind of peace I have not known before. You can fling human frailties at the wind in these wild places. The roads are an all-swallowing empty.

Sometimes I shivered. Lying exhausted on the banks of Lough Neagh, without bike lights, with a dead phone, with a lone horse for company, I was petrified. Once, on Wolf's Hill Road, it began to snow - great dirty heaps from a dark sky. My bike's chain fell and got jammed, my fingers were numb. Another time, at the very top of Divis I tore a tyre. But I always made it back, with no little help from kindly strangers. I love the strangers of Northern Ireland. I want to write songs about them. I will remember each one forever. One stowed away my broken bike in his boot and dropped me home. One fixed my chain. One lovely horse-riding teenager wanted, like so many Indian aunties, to find out my whole life story in ten minutes. No London Underground, this place.

I made new friends, kept old ones. I dated, I mingled. I tutored at Queen's. I wrote reams of bad poems and diligently read them at Poetry and Pints in Bookfinders Café. Poets, I soon found, are good company. Kindness is a principle of life, with them. They're strawberries in a world that's bananas. They're not judgmental, except towards bad poetry, which I agree is barbaric (but mercifully rare in these parts). They take the weather very personally, and are mostly harmless.

My housemates, deeply loyal, fiercely friendly, were my lifeblood. I lived and continue to live in the most warm and eclectic house. We're from many Bs: Bangkok, Banbridge, Bristol, Bundoran, Bengal. We found each other in student accommodation

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and realised we were birds of a feather. In my house, there are no insiders, no outsiders. No one is foreign; it is my place of belonging. Outside, there are always walls.

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Over summer in my second year, I went back to do archival research in a library outside Kolkata. I realised then that there's something about my country you can't find anywhere else. What is it? Is it the chaos, the colour, the anarchy? The temples, the fields, the Mercedes parked beside the slum? The brazen, intimate, no-holds-barred way we are with our friends? I think it is this almost intrusive intimacy, which some find disarming, others alarming, that makes our culture unique. It is also what makes us feel lost abroad.

There are invisible barriers to true intimacy for me here in Belfast; they are subtle, but they hang, like so many ghosts in situ. It begins with naming: my name is who I am. I take the trouble to pronounce Sinéad as '*shinade*', yet to expect the same respect for my difference seems like too much to ask for. I am not 'Priyag', nor 'Pray(as in pray for me)-ag'. I am prə'ja:g. 'Pruh', short and sweet, 'jaag', with emphasis, like the end of *hallelujah*. Yet, for the most part, I remain misnamed; an aberration.

I realise that it's not unfair for me, as a foreigner, to make allowances for linguistic differences. But the issue is more complex. It's a power differential. If you read colonial documents, you'll see a casual disregard for accuracy in naming. Brahma becomes Brumma, Brima, Brama, places are wilfully misnamed, even renamed officially to suit the English tongue. No doubt linguistic difference plays a part, but a sense of civilizational entitlement is also to blame for the assumption that yes, white men can just do that. And everyone else will have to live their lives as mispronounced somethings.

It's my insistence on the innate dignity of difference that makes this an issue. It will, I know, continue to alienate me. But I won't stop. Someone else might lay down the sword, adapt, allow. Put on accents. Go native. 'So what if I'm called *Priyag*? Do they love me any less?' They would think. I know that every time I insist, I untranslate myself. Defamiliarise myself, create a barrier, even with my closest friends. Nevertheless, I *do* insist. It's part of my crusade to make this place just a bit more genuinely plural.

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Part of the difficulty with Belfast is that its culture speaks so much to *itself*, and is so utterly alien to the wider world. Let's forego the simple things: I have picked up 'boke' and 'bake' and 'banjaxed'. The problem is not with my reaching in, but, largely, with Belfast refusing to reach out. For the longest time, for instance, I couldn't believe that many literature students here – trained, degree-holding post-graduates – had not heard of Tagore! Rabindranath Tagore: Indian modernist, artist, musician, Nobel-prize winning poet, novelist, nationalist, friend of Yeats, friend of Ireland? Blank expressions all around.

To take another example, in 2014, 132 school children were shot dead by terrorists in Pakistan. A Belfast solidarity meeting was called, and I did my best to rally support, spread the word in my social sphere. But the resultant display of 'solidarity' was sparse.

We stood, that cold winter night, forty South Asians, and a lone white lad. Candles burned feebly in gloved hands, the wind blew sharply, and the world, it seemed to me, was dark.

I understand where Belfast's insularity comes from. This is a place that, for decades, has been dealing with its own, very particular, very local problems. This is a place where walls were and are built: visible ones, and invisible ones. But isn't it time to sing a different song?

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Or, to talk about another barrier, take sexual desire. It is appalling how sexual desire, a basic, universal human experience, is often viewed by default as some form of desperation when expressed by a person of colour. 'Oh, he's just *crazy* for white girls' is the unspoken – sometimes spoken – cultural vernacular through which our desiring is framed. My desire is not human desire. My desire is *coloured* desire, assigned a place before it can so much as burst from my lips into frightened being.

Do you know what it is like to *be* a colour? We come in many colours; but some people are colourless, some can shed their skin. I *am* my colour; I am branded by my skin; it is the unpeelable, unmitigable barrier to my being in this world. There are things the colourless can talk about, things I cannot talk about. Why? Because anything I say will be an 'authentic' expression of my ineluctable, eternal, nefarious difference. Because anything I say is already mediated through this thing I wear on my flesh. If I am wrong, I am never *just* wrong. I am wrong *and* brown, brown *and* wrong – the brain makes connections.

And so the question is shot at me, again and again: 'Where are you from?' The day Northern Ireland moves ahead will be the day people stop looking at me and instantly, knee-jerk, asking, 'Where are you from?' My skin is a different colour, but maybe I don't *want* to be constantly reminded of my indissoluble difference.

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To this day, I regret not talking to her. As I cycled past her, I saw that she was weeping. Hand to mouth to stop the ragged gasping, tears streaming down her face. She was South Asian, wearing jogging pants, walking down the Lagan Towpath. Behind her was a crowd, jeering. I don't know what they told her. I didn't stop. Why didn't I stop?

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If what I've talked about so far is the experience of a subtle, 'everyday' discrimination, let me not pass by explicit racism – the tipping points, when I've seen for myself, the naked face of hatred. The first time a drunk in bar called me a 'Sammy'. I was unaware that a word last widely used in colonial South Africa was still in popular parlance. The second time a drunk kid on the Towpath yelled 'Fuck off, Paki!' I was catatonic – racism has a way of shutting down the capacity for either rationalisation or angry response. The third time, in my own neighbours' house, the neighbour's friend told me, 'Get out, you fucking Indian'. Strange that being named for what I am – an Indian – should hurt so much. Perhaps people should think more deeply about that: that for those trying to assimilate or at least feel like

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an organic part of a new social reality, being constantly reminded of their constitutive difference is a thorn in a very raw side. I shut the door and went back home. Played my guitar. Everything was upside down. What did this mean?

I hurt, I spoke out to friends. This third time was gendered: the neighbour was asking me out for drinks. Her friend thought this unseemly, and interrupted with her racist injunction. She struck a blow like a slap in the face at my sense of legitimacy as a gendered, sexual being. 'Am I ugly?' I thought. 'Does my skin make me unworthy of attention from the opposite sex?' I reacted much later, perhaps not maturely either. I scrawled a Hindu mantra about being one with the cosmic divine on my chest in permanent marker and put it up as a picture on Instagram, despite not believing in a single wisp of divinity in the cold dark sea of empty space. I think I mainly wanted to yell out, 'Look at my fucking pecs – am I so ugly, really?'

I turned to my cultural totems as an act of war. I could barely hold a note of a Bengali song before I got here, now I croon in unintelligible foreignness at every open mic event I go to. Every word is a protest song. Look, this is me. This is my language, it's not like yours, but dammit, it's beautiful, and you *will* listen.

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Around the world, there is talk of walls going up. Demagogues and bigots are being voted into power. The language of difference is being put to instrumental use: exclude, remove, shut in – these seem to be the new mantras. But I have hope, in Belfast. I have seen the signs: the Belfast Mela, the South Asian Society and its all-embracing celebrations, the traveling poets who are seeing the world. The walls are going up elsewhere, but there is talk here, of moving on, of tearing down walls, of growing, of looking ahead and looking outward. To quote the poet Emma Must, 'This is no longer the city you've read about'. I hope *my* Belfast will embrace the world.